2014

Wendy Ewald edited by Nolan Calisch

Wendy Ewald

Nolan Calisch

Wendy Ewald

Edited by
Nolan Calisch

PSU Art and Social Practice
Reference Points

Wendy Ewald

PSU Art and Social Practice
Reference Points

Wendy Ewald

Edited by
Nolan Calisch

A Conversation with Wendy Ewald

Nolan Calisch

NOLAN CALISCH: Let's start by talking about your collaborative process. Where did your impetus to collaborate with students come from, and how has this approach developed over the course of your career?

WENDY EWALD: It came from being a natural teacher. But I was interested not so much in being a teacher but in sharing what I saw. I started when I was quite young. Since I was the oldest of six kids, I enlisted my siblings in projects I devised, like putting on plays. Then my brother Teddy was hit by a car when he was five. I must have been ten or eleven. He suffered some brain damage and had to learn how to talk and walk again. So helping him to relearn those skills became a crucial teaching experience for me.

I was upset by seeing him in the hospital, mute and unable to walk. I tried to engage him in games that were visual. Since he could see, but not talk or move, I made a stoplight game out of green, yellow, and red construction paper. When he saw green, he had to say, "go." Then his nurse would wheel him forward until I held up the red or yellow card, which meant slow down and stop. That worked, and he liked it.

My sister Holly and I were enlisted in helping him do exercises that helped him reconnect his brain to his body. Holly went on to become a teacher and an artist, too. So that was the historical basis for my interest in working with people.

After high school, when I applied to work with Native American children in Canada, I had just started taking pictures myself. I heard that someone had done a project in a prison, teaching the prisoners to use cameras. I was excited by the idea that people from inside a community could take pictures.

I found out about the Polaroid Foundation and wrote my first grant proposal. It became clear when I started working in Canada in 1969 that the pictures the children took were more interesting than the romantic pictures I was inclined to make. It was not only the fact that they had access to situations that I didn't, it was the way they were composing their pictures. The natural landscape, and the special way they related to it, had everything to do with what their pictures were about. Their pictures were much more evocative of the place than anything anyone else could have done.

NC: I remember you saying—which I thought was really great—that you were empowering your students to make the images they wanted to make, rather than your notion of what a good image should be, essentially giving them the tools to make their own image, right?

WE: They really understood how to use the camera with all its technical potential. That wasn't an issue. What was an issue was how they wanted to frame things and what they wanted to look at. What can happen is that technology ends up making the image, not the people behind the camera.

NC: So your approach obviously goes beyond just giving your students cameras. You spoke a bit about your teaching process and the way in which you frame assignments for them. Could you talk more about that?

WE: Well, we could talk about the *Literacy Through Photography* program I developed. When I came to work under the auspices of institutions like schools, I had

to systematize my approach. I created a curriculum which others could use. I started off asking the children to make photographs of themselves, then of their families and communities, and then finally shooting and writing about their dreams and fantasies. So it started with the individual and then went out to his or her surrounding world.

Then I connected the photographs with writing. I wanted to get inside the institution itself and change it as well as the young people I was working with. I knew that if I wanted to work in schools, within the regular curriculum as part of the regular school day, I had to offer something that the educators felt was helping their agenda. That was teaching reading and writing.

I used writing as a way to focus the students on what they might want to take pictures of. I would ask them to write a piece, pick out images from what they'd written, and then go home and take pictures of those images. Of course, I never really expected that to happen exactly as I asked, but it was a way to get them focused on picture making. Later, I had them write from the photographs. That really worked, because photography is an art of details. You can build a story from the details in the photographs. Unless you're a writer, that can be hard to do. Most kids start with very general ideas of a story, and as a teacher you have to push them to dig deeper and be more specific. Here was the photograph with all the evidence in it. It soon became apparent to me and teachers I worked with that their students were writing a lot more from their photographs. And that became *Literacy Through Photography*.

NC: Another thing that occurs to me about that approach is that you are also making it relevant to their personal lives, so they could find access points.

WE: Yes, exactly. When students are sharing photographs and stories with their classmates in the school setting, their teachers are able to learn more about their lives outside of school. Although things are changing, most schools are based on a white middle class model. But of course many students in public schools aren't middle class or white. Even my son, who has white middle class parents, talks about *the white peoples' education*.

NC: A lot of the work you have done for projects, such as *Memories from Past Centuries* and the *Alphabet Project*, are about confronting that.

WE: The *Alphabet Project* really occurred to me because my son is Colombian, so I particularly noticed the ESL (English as a Second Language) teachers I talked to were complaining about how their students were treated in the school system—how nobody knew anything about them. They would test as having learning disabilities because of their *subpar* language skills. I asked one of the ESL teachers if I could collaborate on a project with her. All of her students except for one were Spanish speaking. We worked together to create a language curriculum, which became the Spanish alphabet. We exhibited the alphabet in the school, so the ESL students could share their language with other kids. It helped to remove the secret or negative overtones that Spanish held for them. It gave me the opportunity to see what words the students chose to represent letters of the alphabet, and how they characterized the community those kids lived in. For example, two of the words they chose were *nervioso* and *impostor*, which refer to the precariousness of their lives as Latino immigrants.

NC: It's interesting that you're making work with students that has an immediate audience in the school, a really intimate audience. But the work is also reaching the art world, which makes it a kind of hybrid situation. When the work is printed, there seems to be intention in giving the student's images a similar level of exhibition as your own, an equal platform. There is dignity bestowed to them in that way. I'm also curious how these decisions were made when you were making the books.

WE: It's important to me to have an audience in the place where the work is made and in the art world. If the work doesn't reach the community where it's made, then it doesn't make sense. But for me, if it doesn't communicate as art or break new visual ground, it isn't effective either. Other people, both artists and teachers, do undertake these projects on their own and that's great. But for me, if I make a model, it has to be right. It has to create a narrative that is true and visually compelling.

And then in books, it's more complicated. I think about it a lot. The exhibition and book *Secret Games* is a compilation of work over thirty years, which contains students' photographs, my photographs, and photographs we made together. I had to figure out how to attribute the work. The curator and I decided to title each student's work with the title of the picture and their name. When they made a picture on their own, they had a particular intention, and the title reflects that vision. A picture I made is accompanied by the title but no author. When the photograph is a collaboration, it's seen as part of a project as a whole, and the students' names are listed at the end, like *Black Self/White Self* and the *Alphabets*.

NC: That's very interesting. I like those intentional choices.

WE: It took a long time to figure out. I'm now working on an Israel/Palestine exhibition and book. I'm one of twelve photographers involved in the project. The curator is thinking I don't need to include the titles or names of the photographs taken by my collaborators. I'm not sure how I'm going to deal with that. I'll contribute over 400 photographs to the exhibition. I understand how all those titles might be overwhelming, but I want my audience to be aware of the relationship of the subject to the camera. It's not a matter of simply crediting them, it's also about reading the photographs. In one case, there is an elderly woman photographing a swimming pool, the way she sees it from afar is not like a young swimmer would who's participating. It's easier to contextualize the pictures in a book.

NC: Right, because you have the opportunity to insert more text.

WE: And I can write something myself. But there is the issue of collaboration. If I didn't put people's names on the images, the images would be more successful as art pieces. That may be why curators don't want me to attribute the photographs to my collaborators. I've noticed that sort of thing over the years, but hopefully it's changing now with the popularity of social practice. It gives us the opportunity to look at the work as a conceptual piece. I know that this kind of messiness can be difficult for people, but of course I like that.

We had a show of exceptional photographs at the University of Arizona taken in Chiapas, Mexico, by indigenous and non-indigenous children. The museum also mounted

a companion exhibition of photographs of Mexico from their permanent collection. I asked the curator if they'd consider buying some of the children's pictures for their collection. She asked me how they would attribute them and how they would file them. That was the end of the idea. It's a political issue for me too. I have only gotten one museum to buy kids' pictures. They will buy my pictures.

NC: What about images that were collaborative?

WE: The curators are more comfortable with that.

NC: Because your name is attached to it?

WE: Yep.

NC: Because it's about monetary value for them?

WE: But it's important, because that is the stuff that will get saved. I have to argue for the value of the work. If a photograph is sold, the money is split between the institution I work with, like the Sna Jtz'Ibajom writers' cooperative in Chiapas, the gallery I work with, and myself. The local organization decides how to allocate the money. I don't feel I can make that decision. For example, one of the Chiapas photographs was chosen to be included in the portfolio for the 1997 Whitney Biennial. They paid a fee for that, which was given to Sna Jtz'Ibajom. They decided to use it to buy 35mm cameras for all the kids I worked with.

NC: Great.

WE: I worked with girls in the same boarding school I'd gone to in Massachusetts. I knew the students or the institution didn't need money. I asked them to decide where they wanted money to go if anything was sold. They chose to buy books for the Aga Khan libraries for Pakistani girls. Fortunately, because some of the girls were upper class, the pictures sold. We were able to send several container loads of books to Pakistan.

NC: What are your thoughts about social practice or this new wave of socially engaged art making that is happening—in many cases using an approach that you've been using for many years, your whole career? What are your feelings about this?

WE: It's funny. I think to myself *I did that* or *I should be part of that*. It seemed like the wave of interest was coming out of the cloud, out of nowhere. But then talking to Harrell Fletcher and realizing he saw my first book, *Portraits and Dreams,* when he was a student, it made more sense. For years, some of us would ask each other, when is this art movement going to hit? How long will it be until people understand this way of working?

What is great about the social practice movement is that it encourages people to look at the relationships embedded in artworks in a holistic way. You're looking at the art making and the relationship, everything—not just seeing one-dimension, the aesthetics of it.

But I don't know if people have come to understand or talk about what can be gained aesthetically from working collaboratively. Access is one thing, but I believe you can get something aesthetically that can't be reached any other

way. The critics usually talk about the process, which is great, but it's not the only thing. So I am happy to have some buddies.

Portland, OR
May 6, 2013

Recalling "Portraits and Dreams"

Harrell Fletcher

As an undergraduate student I spent a lot of time in the *TR* section of my university library. The *TR* section is where you find photography books. This was before popularization of the internet, and, since I was living in a very small, remote town without any art museums or galleries, the library was my main source for learning about what had become my main area of interest—photography. I also looked at other art books, read various fiction and non-fiction authors, and watched films using painful headphones in the library's video archive. But hanging in the *TR* section was my main library activity, one that I not only immensely enjoyed, but was able to justify as research and work, since I had decided that something to do with photography was going to be my profession.

Regardless of the ups and downs in my life, I was able to take solace in a stack of photo books and a chair by a window. Wandering the stacks was part of the whole experience. I would scan the increasingly familiar titles and spines, looking for something new that I had not seen yet or a favorite that I wanted to spend more time viewing. I would then settle into one of the few chairs that I particularly liked, so chosen for its comfort and location. Then slowly, like savoring a great meal, I would make my way looking through the books, page by page. After that, the ones that really struck me in one way or another would be collected up and taken home for longer inspection, which included reading the introductions, bios, and marginalia in an attempt to learn a little more about the people who made the work. Some of the books that I brought home with me often were ones that really intrigued me, but they also bothered me in some way. This made me question what it was about them that I found so compelling. Books like *The Pond* by John Gossage and *The New Industrial Parks Near Irving, California* by Lewis Baltz contradicted

the aesthetic I had been brought up on through Ansel Adams and Edward Weston. *The New Topographics* was jarringly interesting, not unlike my early encounters with punk rock.

Another book that I came across at this time, which also crashed through traditional art making ideas for me but in a very different way, was *Portraits and Dreams* by Wendy Ewald. My first glance at the images in the book left me feeling very intrigued. There was something different about them, but I couldn't quite figure out what it was. I took the time to read about the process, and as I put the larger concept and methodology together, I was both horrified and thrilled—Wendy Ewald had not taken most of the photographs in the book! Instead, she had facilitated the structure and situation and worked with a set of unlikely collaborators to create work that could be made no other way. Everything that I was being taught at that time about art and artists was focused on originality and singular authorship—the importance of expressing *yourself*, not about helping other people express *their* selves. Of course, a lot of that ideology came from teachers dedicated to helping students *express themselves*, but somehow my teacher's work was different. It wasn't their "art work," it was just what they did to make a living. Their own work was private, individually focused, and non-participatory, and that is what they supposedly really valued. Suddenly I was faced with a challenge to my understanding of how an artist could work and function in society. All of my doubts slipped away as I looked again at the photographs and read the stories about the children that Ewald had worked with. It was, I felt, in many ways more interesting and compelling than any art I'd ever come across.

I checked out *Portraits and Dreams* and brought it home. I started showing it to various friends who were

also amazed by it. We tried to discuss what it all meant, but didn't seem to have the vocabulary for it. Connections were made to children's choirs and theater, but these seemed inadequate. The fact that the *Portraits and Dreams* participants had created their own very personal content was something new to think about. Nothing was ever the same for me.

I now see a very direct connection between what I learned and experienced from *Portraits and Dreams* and Ewald's work in general. I followed her work very closely after that first encounter and recognize its influence on my own development as an artist and teacher working in participatory and collaborative ways.

Letter from Willie Whitaker

Dear Wendy,

Where to begin as I can only imagine the countless children you have worked with over the years and the positive influence you have had. I look upon those days at Campbell's Branch Elementary with great fondness and talk about my first exposure to photography with equal enthusiasm. Actually to this day I still take many photos each year. Like many camera buffs several years ago I moved into the digital world which is ok, the film sure is cheaper and one can simply delete poorer efforts (see attached one of my better efforts with digital photography taken with a Sony Mavica 400), instead of developing film in a dark room one develops in a computer, I guess that's progress. Since leaving Line Fork, life certainly took on a much quicker pace and it seems since I passed forty it appears as if it is moving like a fast forward button on a VCR, way too fast and appears there is no way to slow it down. I have always been told if one is not moving ahead they are falling behind but I look forward to retiring back to Line Fork someday to a simpler time and place I hope I find it there as I did as a child.

Between Campbell's Branch and today has been a grand adventure > High School > College (which I would have never dreamed of in those days — besides life college was one of the great gifts my mother and father gave me) > and now two

thirds of my work career is nearly over. I am currently the Resource Manager at Beech Fork Lake in the Huntington District of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. I began my career with the Corps as a Park Ranger at Buckhorn Lake in the Louisville District in 1985, several Parks and Lakes later and suddenly over twenty years has sped by.

I have a much worn copy of the book and show it quite often, it is a snap shot (actually many snap-shots) of a precious moment in time that becomes more valuable as the years flow on by. Not only my photos but the photos of my other class mates show many of the people I remember dotingly as a child. My current friends and colleagues nearly to a "T" say the same thing, "I wish someone would have done that at our school" which speaks volumes to the positive impact you had on us or certainly myself. The photo of my (now deceased) father and his mule Kate, him pulling back on the reins, me asking him to stop and let me take his picture after a hard days work plowing the corn fields. The one of my niece with her twenty-two rifle who now teaches school and has a child about the same age she was when I snapped that photo, one of a simple white chicken near the corn crib, while just out of view was my mother holding a pail of fresh milk. Oh yes they spur many memories and I will be forever thankful for them.

Funny how one can remember the location of photos even after taking hundreds and many years after

taking them, the smells, weather, the laughter or sadness that filled the air.....Well as usual I have started rambling so I'll go for now please stay in touch!

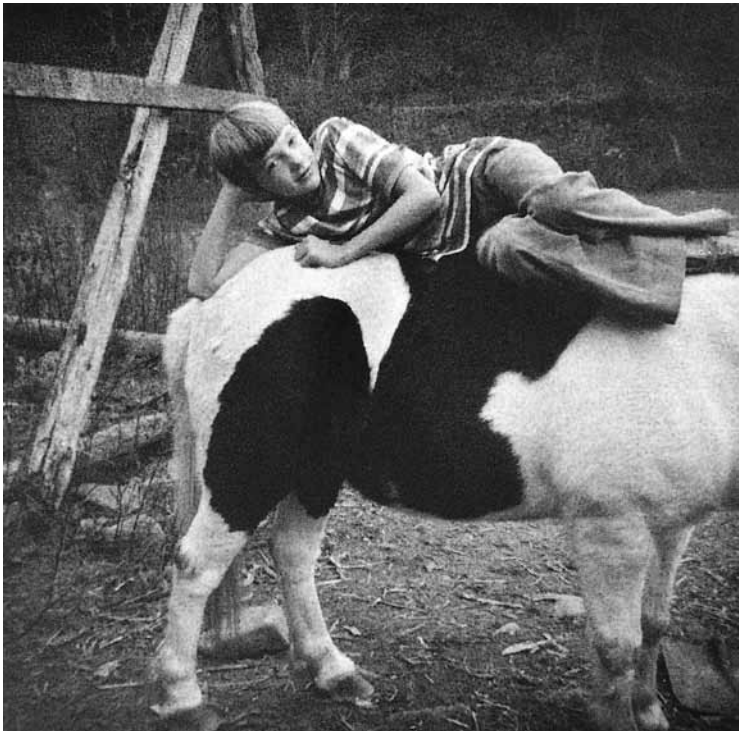
Willie
Willie L. Whitaker
Resource Manager
Beech Fork Lake

Willie Whitaker was a student whose work appeared in *Portraits and Dreams.*

Portraits and Dreams: Appalachian Children

Johnny Wilder watching television,
photograph by Wendy Ewald.

Self-portrait reaching for the Red Star sky.
—Denise Dixon



I am lying on the back of my old horse.
—Russell Akemon

My space-ship was taking off.
—Scott Huff

Denise Dixon posing her twin brothers,
photograph by Wendy Ewald.

Johnny Wilder 2009,
photograph by Wendy Ewald

Scott Huff 2012,
photograph by Wendy Ewald.

Project Description

In 1975, I moved to Kentucky to work with Appalshop, a group of filmmakers, artists and musicians whose striking documentary films I'd seen. As an artist in the schools for the Kentucky Arts Commission, I taught photography to children in three elementary schools: Kingdom Come, Campbells Branch, and Cowan. In my classes I tried to create a lively, open atmosphere, so that the students would feel at home expressing themselves. For the most talented of them, picture-taking became part of their lives, and especially of their play.

We built two darkrooms at the larger schools and provided materials for drawing, writing, and making books in all the classrooms, and there were always books of photographs around. As they became more comfortable with the camera, I wanted them to expand their ideas about picture making, while staying close to the people and places they felt most deeply about. I asked them to photograph themselves, their families, their animals and their community, and to think about stories they might tell with photographs. When they made self-portraits, they discovered they could be subjects of their own photographs and could change themselves into whatever characters they chose to create. The students made fabulous photographs with the Instamatic or Polaroid cameras that they carried with them faithfully.

Finally, I asked the children to photograph their dreams or fantasies. In order to free up the class for their intensely personal and often frightening dreams, we shut ourselves in the darkroom, sat on the floor, and told each other our scariest dreams. The photographs the children took afterwards broke new ground for many of them—and for me.

In 1985, Writers and Readers published a book of their photographs and stories. In 2009, I starting meeting again with the students now in their forties. I collaborated with Liz Barret, a filmmaker at Appalshop, and we gathered photographs former students had made in the intervening years, and video taped interviews with them for a film and updated book.

Time Frame
1975–1982 and 2009–present

Funding
Self-initiated in the first year with cameras donated by the Polaroid Foundation.

1977–1982: Worked as Artist-in-the Schools for the Kentucky Arts Commission with extra funding from the Lions Club, the Rotary Club, and the Fish and Game Club.

2009: Self-initiated with grants from Kentucky Foundation for Women, NEA media, USA Artists, and the Guggenheim Foundation.

Budget
About $5,000 a year from 1977–1982.

Reference Points
The WPA photography project, works of art by children, "primitive" artists, and Alan Teller and Jerry Zbiral.

Context
Three rural Kentucky elementary schools and their surrounding communities.

Audience
Exhibitions in the Whitesburg Bank, University of Kentucky, followed by a national traveling show to museums through the help of SITES (Smithsonian Institute Traveling Exhibition Service). A publication that is now in libraries and private collections.

Continuity
I worked with many of the students over three or four years. After 35 years, a reunion was held in the Whitesburg community center. Students brought pictures and we had a public discussion about the experience of making pictures then. This is an ongoing project.

Literacy Through Photography: Durham Public Schools, North Carolina

I am alone in the wilderness.
—Phillip Liverpool

My cousin playing with her baby.
—Lateisha Tenil Harris

Jungle Music II: Drew and Taylor.
—Phillip Liverpool

A still life with a picture of me.
—Kelly Mitchell

Now what key is it? My mom, Aminah.
—Maryam Nubee

Durham workshop, 2009.

Durham workshop, 2009.

Project Description

In 1989, after years of working with children in various situations, I was invited by the Center for Documentary Studies (CDS) at Duke University to start a program for the Durham Public Schools (DPS). In order to accommodate all the schools in Durham who wanted to have an LTP class, I taught a class at the CDS at Duke cross-listed as art and education. The curriculum combined readings in education, photography, and sociology and allowed me to practice teaching LTP as an assistant to a classroom teacher.

Many of the DPS students I met had trouble writing; typically, they would labor painfully over one or two sentences. Around this time, I began experimenting in elementary and middle school classrooms to see how photography and writing might help to cross-pollinate each other. The challenge of acknowledging the complexity of children's lives inspired me to imagine photographs that, with students' participation, would be truthful and penetrating. I also wanted to test my suspicion that an artist's ways of describing the world could help a student struggling with something as apparently incongruous as a social studies paper. Could a lesson that begins with an image help students write with more detail, depth, and enthusiasm? In short, could an artist's way of thinking be the basis for certain lesson plans? I found when the students worked from a photograph that had something to do with their own lives, especially a picture they had taken themselves, they were able to write much more fluently.

In creating the core concepts of what I began to call *Literacy Through Photography*, I identified certain formal elements of photography, such as framing, point of view, timing, the use of symbols, and observation of details—all of which, of course, have parallels in writing. I asked students to think about and apply these concepts one at a time or in combination. For example, when the kids were photographing themselves and their families, I asked them to concentrate on framing. If they were photographing their fantasies, I'd urge them to think about point of view. If we were talking about timing, we'd wonder aloud about the best narrative sequence for a series of images.

My interest in the intersections of art and education has led me to more widely share the projects I've been doing for the past 20 years with teachers in the DPS and other places. In order to explore how our projects could be used in a classroom setting and connected to a standard curriculum, we organized workshops based on the core concepts of photography or on new projects I came up with like *Memories from Past Centuries* or *American Alphabets*. I conceived of these projects as a way of making provocative photographs, but also as a way for teachers to bring political and social themes into their teaching. With this approach, the teachers I'd been collaborating with in *Literacy Through Photography* began to take an active part in shaping the projects for their own classrooms.

Time Frame
1989 to present

Funding
Self-initiated with CDS. Andy Warhol Foundation, Center for Documentary Studies, Durham Public Schools, Nathan Cummings Foundation, Open Society Institute, National Endowment for the Arts and the Surdna Foundation. In the beginning, about $25,000 a year, then for many years up to $100,000 a year.

Audience
Teachers and students of the Durham Public Schools' elementary and middle schools. Teachers from around the world who attended workshops and started their own LTP programs.

Continuity
Two books: *I Wanna Take Me a Picture: Teaching Photography and Writing to Children* and *Literacy and Justice through Photography: A Classroom Guide* were published for families and teachers.

Lisa Lord: A Teacher's Reflection

How much love and how much hate have children learned by the time they are in school? I imagine humans begin learning to love from the early relationships that are necessary for our survival as babies. How do we learn to hate? In *The Swallows of Kabul*, a novel for adults, Yasmina Khadra (2005) writes of characters that witness public executions daily and become unsettled if one doesn't occur. She writes of "the light of conscience gone out" (p. 9).

I wondered if the *Memories from Past Centuries* project, which focuses on the Holocaust and thus deals with matters of hatred, violence, and conscience, would be my students' first recognition of the possibility of genocide. I don't think they had ever considered the murder of a whole group of people, but they had been learning to love and to hate. Their hate lessons were learned through cruel events in local news or from fights at school or in their neighborhoods. I also wondered about explicit teaching in homes, schools, churches, and neighborhoods about what is holy and right regarding violence. I wondered, too, about the feeling that sometimes cruelty is justified or even something one is bound to do. How many times have I heard students justify fighting by saying, "My mama told me I have to hit him back if he hits me." That teaching trumps school rules that forbid fighting. Adding to the power of lessons from families and neighbors, my students are saturated with ideas and images from TV, movies, music videos, video games, advertisements, and computer games. For the sake of entertainment and commercialism, they see and hear violence every day. What if students could create their own stories and art to resist the pervasive violence of their world? Along with its authentic and meaningful writing, reading, research, and social studies lessons, this project is also about just that—helping students recognize their own capacity to make a difference, and giving students the chance to create their own artwork with a message powerful enough to kindle a flame of resistance to prejudice and cruelty.

In creating their artwork, students saw and heard themselves speaking as someone other than themselves. Students repeating the imaginary experience of being another person, of being enemies. Is this a way to practice empathy? And how much practice is needed to slow down long-rehearsed, hit-him-back responses? Can stories from history and participation in creating art about resisting violence teach children a new habit of placing themselves in someone else's shoes? Can these lessons in empathy stand up to lessons in hate and re-sensitize students to the horror of violent acts in the world?

One of my students reminded me of the Nazis' effective technique for indoctrinating children—they used altered fairy tales and nursery rhymes, propaganda-filled literature, in a time when stories were the most common amusement for children. For a long time in the United States, every child knew the traditional versions of "Little Red Riding Hood," "Cinderella," and "The Three Little Pigs" because those stories had been repeated so often. What were German children learning from Nazi fairy tales? Prejudice? Hatred? What do Americans learn from "Little Red Riding Hood" and "Cinderella"? Obedience? Cleverness in outsmarting the Big Bad Wolf? What are the lessons available in jingles and TV theme songs? What else is repeated often enough to be embedded in our hearts and minds, in our sense of identity and values?

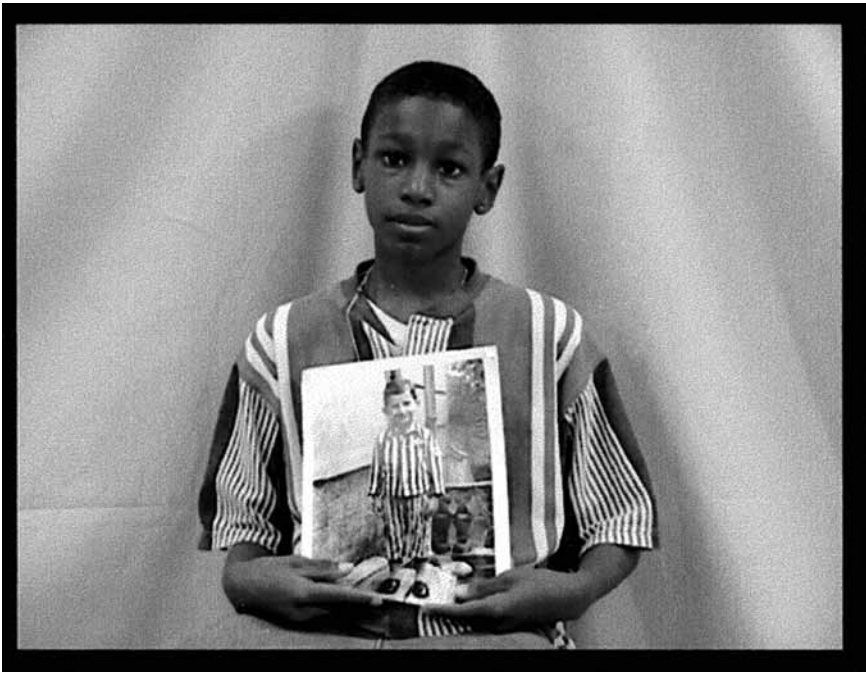
If I had thought about how many times my students would read the one-page case histories or examine the single black-and-white photo of a Holocaust survivor in their assignment, I would have called it excessive and unnecessary. If I had known how many

times they would reverse and replay the segments of their video pieces, I would have planned directions to move to a new project. (I didn't realize at first that the redundancy would be productive and would enrich students' understanding instead of causing them to lose focus.)

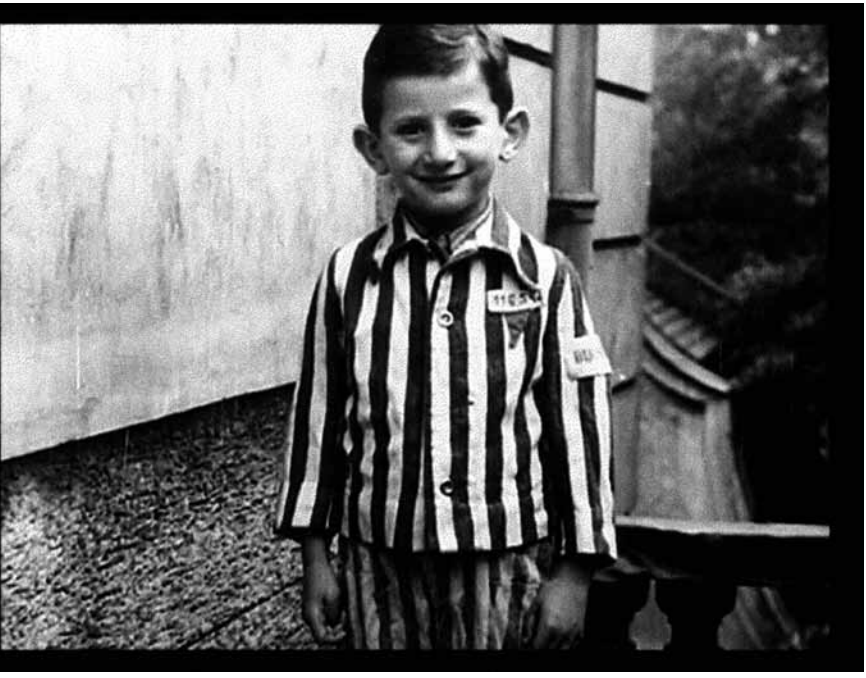
But when I noticed the questions that arose throughout this project, such as Why did the Nazis hate the Jews, Were all Germans Nazis, and How can a videotape make the world a better place, I was thankful that the portraits of survivors and the stories of resistance and bravery captivated students. I was grateful they could tirelessly watch themselves take on different historic roles. Showing this experience to be more powerful than fairy tales, television, video games, and jingles, Dominick added this afterthought in his video, "...and it really happened."

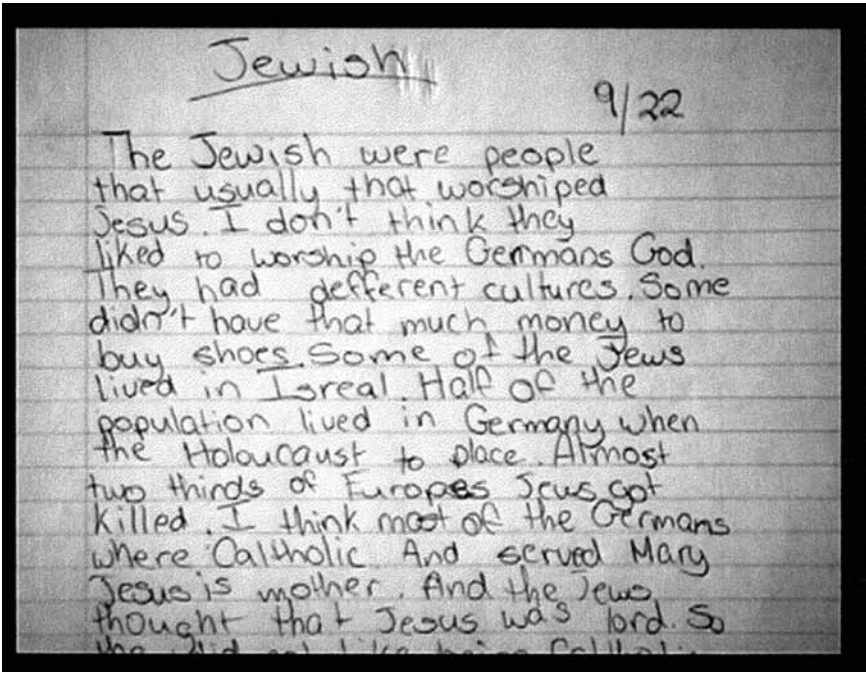
Memories from Past Centuries

Patrick Whitely watching his performance
for the Holocaust project, photograph
by Pete Mauney



Patrick Whitely, *Memories from Past Centuries* film still

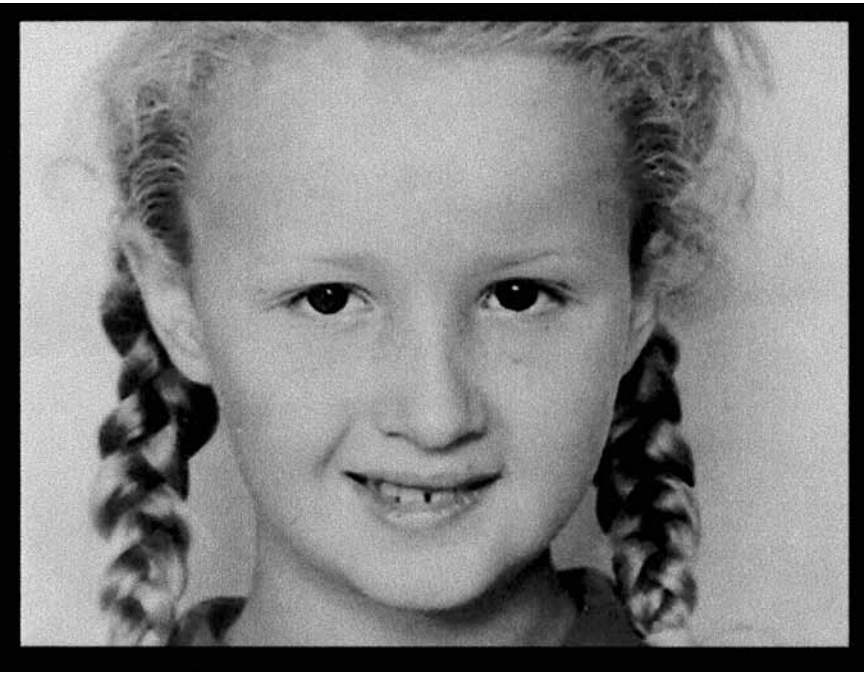


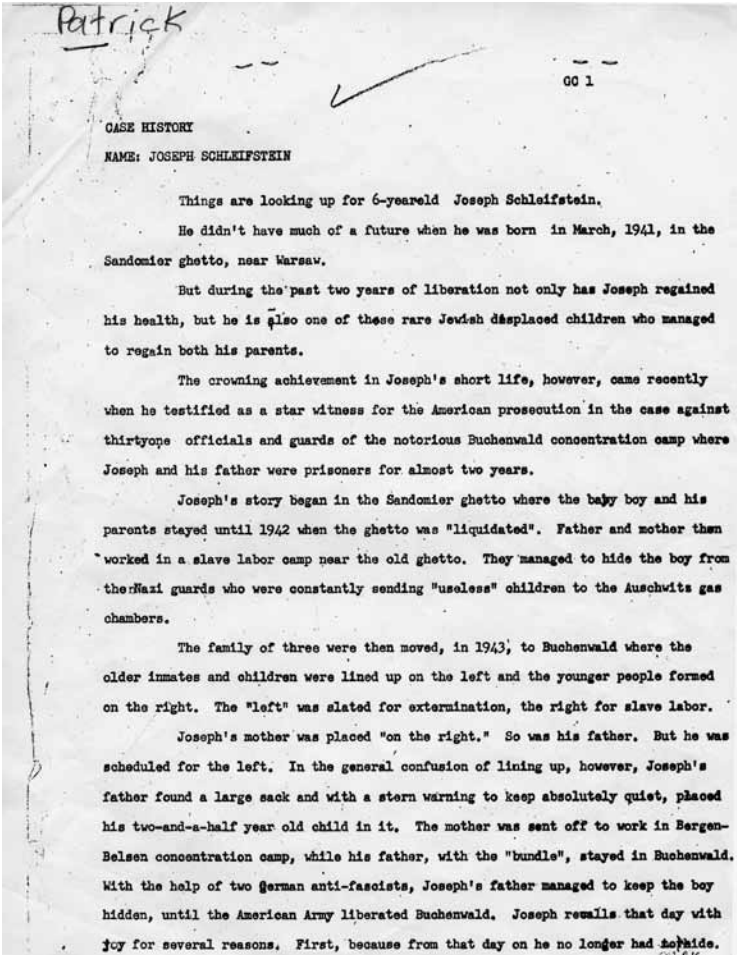

Jewish 9/22

The Jewish were people that usually that worshiped Jesus. I don't think they liked to worship the Germans God. They had defferent cultures. Some didn't have that much money to buy shoes. Some of the Jews lived in Isreal. Half of the population lived in Germany when the Holocaust to place. Almost two thirds of Europes Jews got killed. I think most of the Germans where Caltholic. And served Mary Jesus is mother. And the Jews thought that Jesus was lord. So

Memories from Past Centuries film still

Memories from Past Centuries film still





Patrick

GC 1

CASE HISTORY

NAME: JOSEPH SCHLEIFSTEIN

Things are looking up for 6-yeareld Joseph Schleifstein.

He didn't have much of a future when he was born in March, 1941, in the Sandomier ghetto, near Warsaw.

But during the past two years of liberation not only has Joseph regained his health, but he is also one of these rare Jewish displaced children who managed to regain both his parents.

The crowning achievement in Joseph's short life, however, came recently when he testified as a star witness for the American prosecution in the case against thirtyone officials and guards of the notorious Buchenwald concentration camp where Joseph and his father were prisoners for almost two years.

Joseph's story began in the Sandomier ghetto where the baby boy and his parents stayed until 1942 when the ghetto was "liquidated". Father and mother then worked in a slave labor camp near the old ghetto. They managed to hide the boy from the Nazi guards who were constantly sending "useless" children to the Auschwits gas chambers.

The family of three were then moved, in 1943, to Buchenwald where the older inmates and children were lined up on the left and the younger people formed on the right. The "left" was slated for extermination, the right for slave labor.

Joseph's mother was placed "on the right." So was his father. But he was scheduled for the left. In the general confusion of lining up, however, Joseph's father found a large sack and with a stern warning to keep absolutely quiet, placed his two-and-a-half year old child in it. The mother was sent off to work in Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, while his father, with the "bundle", stayed in Buchenwald. With the help of two German anti-fascists, Joseph's father managed to keep the boy hidden, until the American Army liberated Buchenwald. Joseph recalls that day with joy for several reasons. First, because from that day on he no longer had to hide.

Patrick Whitely case history
on Joseph Schleifstein

Secondly, because he started getting "lots more to eat and drink." And thirdly, Joseph remembers this with greatest glee, because there were "lots and lots" of rides that the Americans gave him on their tanks and in the jeeps.

Almost immeditately following liberation the American Joint Distribution Committee entered Joseph's life. It arranged to have him and his father go to Switzerland for a recuperative period. But after a couple of months Joseph's father returned to look for his wife. She was located finally in the town of Dachau, near the site of another infamous concentration camp, where the family still lives.

But the Schleifsteins' days in Germany are numbered and all three are anxiously counting them. Through the help of AJDC the family was registered and processed for emigration to the United States. Joseph's father has an uncle, Julius Szwickman in New York City, and a sister, Mrs. Rachel Harmolyn in Toronto, Canada.

* * *

Project Description

I was commissioned by curators Marvin Heiferman and Carole Kismaric to produce a new work for the group exhibition *To the Rescue: Seven Artists in an Archive*. Each of us was asked to use the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) archive as a starting point.

The JDC was created during World War I to help rescue Jewish refugees from the pogroms taking place in Europe and Russia; today, the JDC continues helping Jews. The archive contains photographs, documents, films, and videos, many dating back to the World War I.

I began looking for photographs that would communicate to the elementary and middle school students I'd be working with. Two teachers from the Durham Public Schools, Lisa Lord and Robert Hunter, worked with me from the outset of the project.

First I wanted to ascertain just how much my fifth and eighth-grade collaborators knew about the war, so I asked the students to write about what they knew about Jews and Nazis. One of the students thought Nazis were American Indians, another believed that Catholics were Jews. I found a cache of photographs with attached case histories of Jewish children who had survived the war and needed new homes. I gave each DPS student a photograph and a case history of a child of the same gender and roughly the same age. I asked them to read through the histories. Some of the students started to swap the pictures among themselves. As the project evolved, students recognized striking similarities between themselves and the children whose likenesses and stories they took on.

I asked the students to write about the child in their picture in the first person, as if they were writing about themselves. They also were asked to write two more pieces: one as if they were a witness to their child's experience, and another as if their parents were Nazi sympathizers. I wanted them to consider the historical sweep of the situation.

Each student and I picked one piece of the student's writings to dramatize. I tried to balance it between the three types of voices (the voice of the student, of the child in the picture, and of the Nazi-sympathizer parents). The students memorized their pieces and practiced their delivery.

My cameraman husband and I constructed a simple set with different colored backdrops, which could be changed with each performance. The students brought props and costumes. Many of the children tried to dress in the same way as their historical partner. One student, by the name of Patrick, wore a blue-and-white striped polo shirt to mirror the concentration camp uniform of Sacha S.

In the edited two-channel video, the students were introduced by their own names and the names of the Jewish children they were portraying. They spoke to the camera in the persona of the child in the JDC photograph. On the second screen was the historical portrait of the Jewish child. The editing stressed two contrapuntal ideas: one, the student's performance side-by-side with the image of his or her Jewish counterpart; and two, the students' writing before they'd studied the war alongside photos from the archive. This juxtaposition illustrated a tension between imagined history and historical reality.

Time Frame
1988–1989 school year

Funding
Commission from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.

Context
To the Rescue: Seven Artists in an Archive traveled to five museums in the US and students from two Durham Public Schools travelled to the International Center of Photography to attend the exhibition. In addition, DPS teachers continue to create their own historical projects based on archives.

Audience
Museum visitors and students.

Continuity
A syllabus for the project is in the Teachers College Press book *Literacy and Justice through Photography: A Classroom Guide.*

American Alphabets

White Girls Alphabet

queen n.
A woman born into prestigious authority;
and therefore developing grace and
sophistication.

Her poise and grace were known throughout
society—at school and at home. Her delicate
smile had awed many, for they were fasci-
nated and transfixed by her elegance.
She was the queen, a worldly woman who
was known and respected by all.

talk v.i. & t.
to speak; to express speech.

The boy is always talking trash.

x n.
Twenty-fourth letter of the alphabet.

I'm entering the X-games.

Spanish Alphabet

yo-yo m. yo-yo
It has strings that you tie on your finger
and you let it go; it will spin forward

I know what a yo-yo is.

Arabic Alphabet installation,
photograph by Wendy Ewald

Project Description

Like most everyone I know, I first encountered written language in children's alphabet primers. Looking back, I now see that the words and the visual examples used to represent letters reinforced the worldview of the middle class white girl I happened to be. A picture of a shiny new car illustrated the letter C. My father ran a Chevrolet dealership in Detroit, so I thought this example had been dreamed up with me in mind.

I began to hear disturbing stories from the English as a Second Language teachers I worked with in the Durham Public Schools. They talked about the bad treatment their students sometimes received from other teachers, who assumed that because the children didn't speak English well that they were stupid. Those stories prompted me to think about using photographs to teach language. With the students' help, I made pictures to illustrate the alphabet so children could influence the images and meaning of a primer—in effect, make it their own.

For many years, North Carolina has been a stop on the migrant route from Central America to North America. Many of these migrants don't speak English and many are not citizens. I created an alphabet with the Spanish-speaking children of these immigrants. I asked them to think of a word in their own language for each letter of the alphabet, and to assign these words visual signs specific to their culture. I photographed the signs, objects, or scenes they selected. When the negatives were developed, the children altered them with Magic Markers, adding the letter and word they were illustrating. The children said their English-speaking peers were mistrustful when they spoke Spanish. They were happy to work on a project in their own language that they could share with their schoolmates without fear of hostility.

A couple of years after working with the Latino children, I made an alphabet with students at Central Intermediate School, a black high school that holds historical significance in Cleveland, Ohio. Like the alphabet created by Spanish-speaking children, the terms for this alphabet represented the thoughts and values that African American children consider an integral part of their lives.

The students started their alphabet by reading aloud writings by John Edgar Wideman and Toni Morrison, which incorporated African American vernacular. Eventually, I also made an alphabet with white high school girls in Andover, Massachusetts. We looked at photographs and writing by students throughout the history of the all girls boarding school and talked about how the students' language and self-image had evolved over time. In small groups the girls chose words like *flirt*, *weight*, and *insecure*, which they felt reflected their era. When seeing the chosen words together, many girls thought the words represented their lack of power in a male dominated school.

For my final project, I made an alphabet with Arabic students from a middle school in Queens, New York. These Arabic-speaking students had never before had the opportunity to meet as a group in their school. We eventually turned their alphabet into huge silk banners and hung them from the second floor of the Queens Museum. We invited the students' parents and other members of the Arabic community to attend an opening celebration. As they watched the banners sway above them in the air-conditioning, they talked about how important it was to see their language honored in this way. Out of these alphabets, I put together a book called *American Alphabets*.

Time Frame
1997–2003

Funding
Self-initiated in Durham, NC. I also received commissions from the Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, Addison Gallery of American Art, the Queens Museum, and funding for the Arabic Alphabet from the Surdna Foundation.

Budget
Varied among the four different projects: The Spanish Alphabet totaled about $1500 for film and printing. About $15,000 was used for the African-American and White Girls Alphabets, and $20,000 for the Arabic Alphabet projects and exhibitions.

Reference Points
Language and Images, the alphabets I was brought up with and Ebonics.

Context
Bethesda Elementary School, Durham, NC, Central Intermediate School, Cleveland, Ohio, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts, and IS220, Queens, New York.

Audience
Museum visitors and students from each community in the school in Durham, and viewers of the book *American Alphabets.*

Continuity
The book *American Alphabets* is still in circulation and lesson plans for the projects are in *Literacy and Justice through Photography: A Classroom Guide.*

Lisa Lord: A Teacher's Reflection

When I walked down a street in Athens, Greece, and saw print on a street sign, I couldn't read a word. I wasn't completely certain the sign wasn't upside down. I enjoyed a restaurant meal more when I pointed to a fish in a cooler instead of a word on a menu. When I taught in South Carolina, a sea island student asked, "We cuss up K yet?" I answered, "Huh?" I needed repetition and elaboration before I knew she was asking whether I had shown her how to write the letter *K* in cursive yet. Those are obvious lessons in the importance of understanding language.

Working with students on the *American Alphabets* project reminded me of the many times we think we understand one another's language when, in fact, we would benefit from pointing out an object or asking for repetition and clarification. We would communicate better if we didn't assume we pictured the same idea as someone else.

In our class, "A" is not for "apple," or for "aardvark." In our culture, for the sake of teaching the letters of the alphabet to preschoolers, we buy toys and books filled with pictures and words to go with each letter. For older children, thousands of so-called alphabet books are in print, displaying a variety of insects, reptiles, sights to see, foods to eat, facts about states, poetry terms, and so forth. My fourth- and fifth-graders already know the alphabet and lots of words that begin with each letter when they enter my classroom.

My question was, could my students study the alphabet in a new, personal way that would engage their curiosity and imaginations and build writing skills and vocabulary? Would the words chosen reflect the diversity of the classroom? Would different definitions of family emerge? Would choosing words and planning images prompt us to appreciate our common language and how we understand one another?

As teachers, we should do the *American Alphabets* project as a celebration of the language we share in the classroom. We also should do this project as a celebration of the language that sounds the same when we read and speak it but conjures different ideas and meanings, depending on our varied experiences. We need to set and develop a stage for students to recognize their similarities and to comfortably ask for clarification and explanation about differences—to realize they aren't necessarily thinking the same things when they use the same words.

And we should do this project for the sake of the processes that are involved. In *American Alphabets*, students examine lots of letters, words, and images. They make innumerable decisions, often negotiating choices of words and images, not to mention photographic choices about framing, point of view, symbols, and timing. Other classmates, and audience members too, question and elaborate on layers of meanings and their significance.

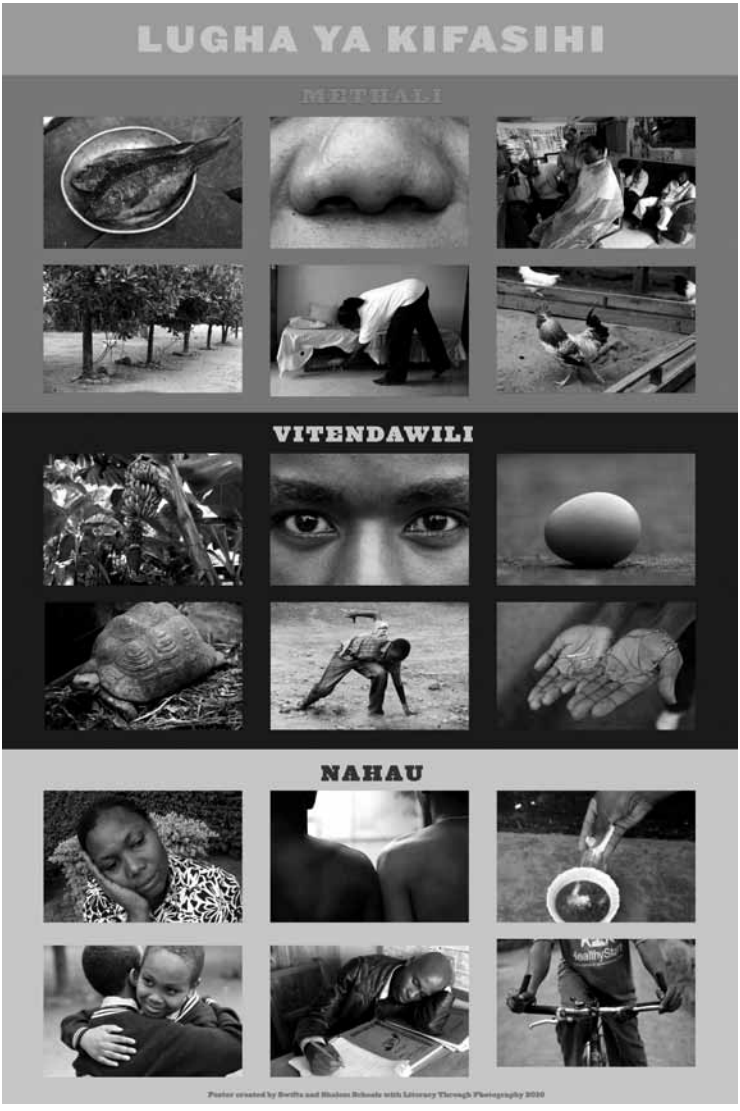
Perhaps it takes a lifetime of practice to gain the habit of thinking that we might not understand another person or a situation as well as we think we do—continual practice to not jump to conclusions and lock into our own understanding of a word or an image. The *American Alphabets* project helped me open my mind. As a teacher I realized, "Oh, yeah, this is their alphabet, not mine. This is kid language, not teacher talk." Once again, my understanding was prodded and grew in just the way that I wished for—to help me to remember not to assume I understand. *A* is for *appreciation* of the power of language. Once my eyes were opened, I rejoiced in the theme of Tanaka's pieces that celebrate individuality among kids and music—they don't all like the same CDs! I breathed a sigh of relief in the tenderness of Justin's poem about his cat, a recognition that some things don't change.

As teachers we can enjoy our students' self-expression; we can learn about their culture with as much enthusiasm as we would give to learning about a more obviously "foreign" culture.

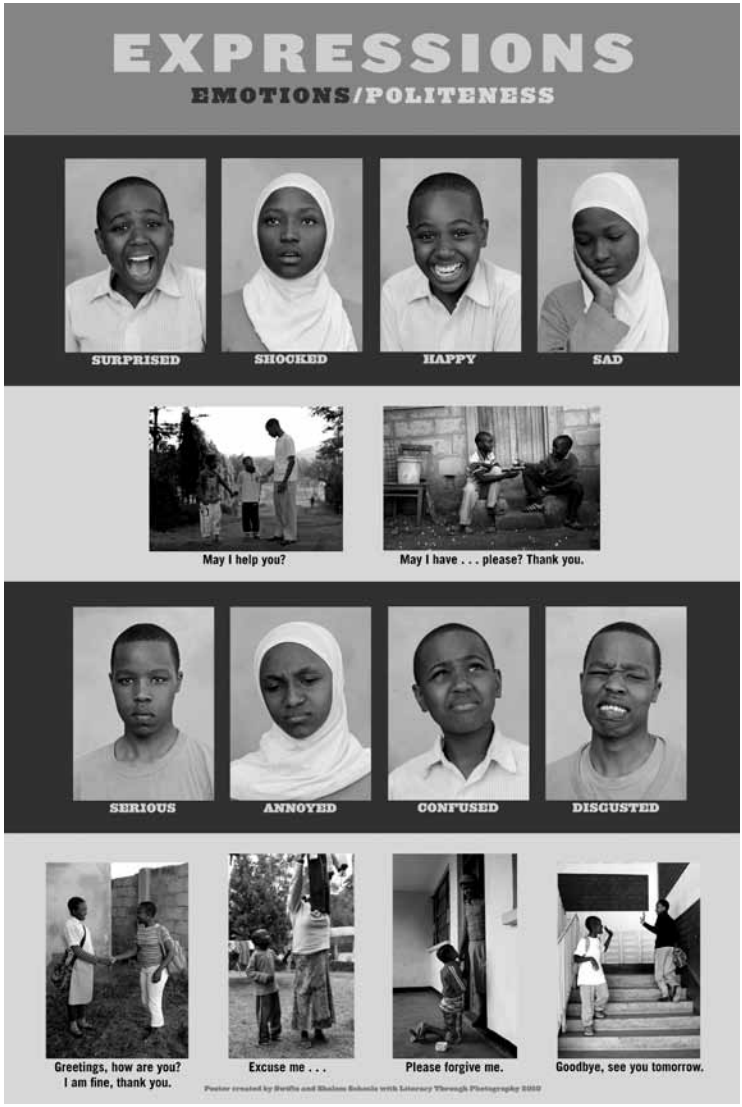
Literacy Through Posters: Tanzania

Teacher's workshop 2010,
photograph by Wendy Ewald

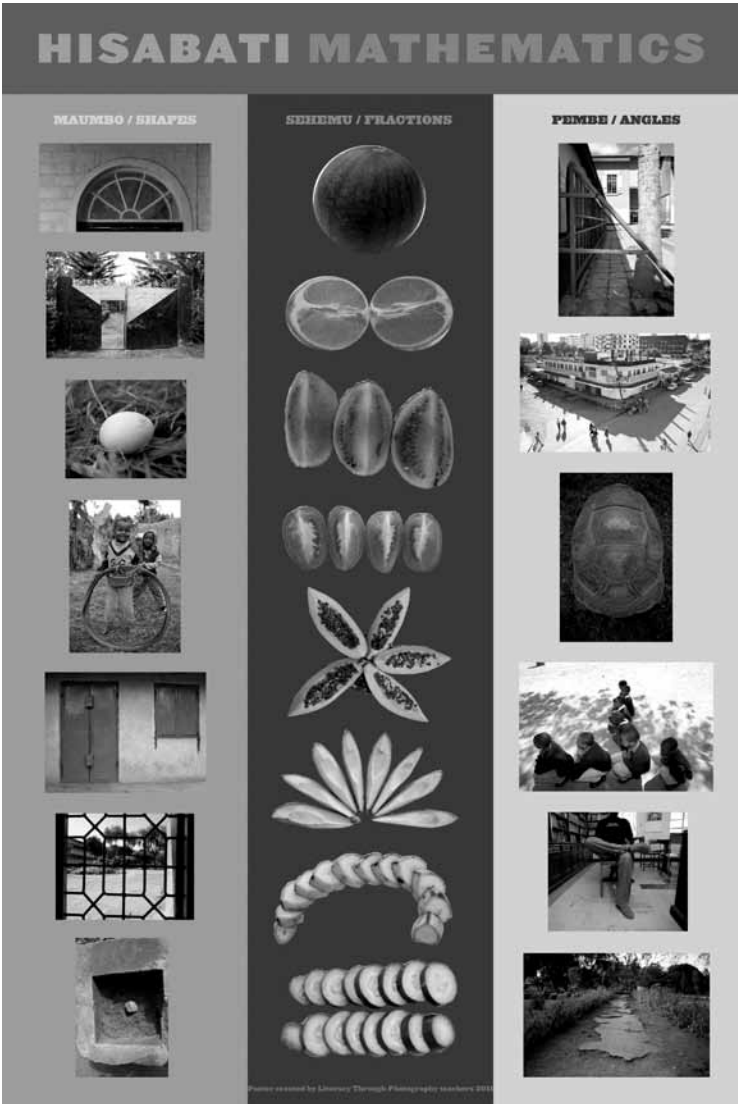
Teacher's workshop 2010, photograph by Wendy Ewald



Tanzania Kiswahili Poster



Tanzania Expressions Poster



Tanzania Mathematics Poster

Tanzania Science Poster

Project Description

In July 2007, the Ministry of Education and local businessmen invited me and the project coordinator for LTP in Durham to lead a workshop for 40 elementary teachers—one teacher from every school in the district.

Today Tanzanian students learn in classrooms where the teacher-to-pupil ratio can reach 1:100. They have few if any textbooks, and access to basic materials like paper and pencils is sharply limited. The students have almost no visual aids.

The national education plan prioritizes participatory education, active learning, and attention to social issues, such as gender and HIV/AIDS. But the classroom populations and the lack of resources make it nearly impossible to meet the national requirements.

Since the first workshop, Tanzanian teachers have begun piloting projects with start-up supplies (cameras, film, and books) provided by LTP and now housed in a local Arusha resources center by our Tanzanian partner. Mr. Shaibu, now retired, leads this effort as he assists teachers with their new LTP projects.

In 2010, the LTP Education, Resource and Culture Center was registered as an official NGO in Tanzania. It was logical that the Duke University Center for International Studies, where I'm a senior research associate, would partner with the new NGO to carry out additional training programs.

Our next objective is to produce curriculum materials to distribute among all primary schools in Tanzania. The first stage involves the production of a set of posters that directly address the national curriculum in a manner that is culturally relevant, visually rich, and interactive.

Unlike rote memorization and the recital of facts, images are open to interpretation and engage the imagination. They encourage students to synthesize a lesson with their own ideas and provoke students to look more closely at their world outside the classroom.

At every step in the project, Tanzanian teachers and students were involved in creating, evaluating, and testing the curriculum posters. Several groups of teachers in different parts of the country were asked to write and test lesson plans for each core primary school subject, using photographs as the source material. Then a team of photographers, including myself, and teachers made photographs for a poster for each subject. Katy Homans, a great graphic designer, worked with teachers to layout posters that tell community stories, for example about the environment or KiSwahili riddles (proverbial learning).

We plan to distribute to all 16,000 primary schools a set of ten LTP photographic posters and a study booklet that are linked to the national curriculum. The posters engage core subjects such as Science (HIV/AIDS), KiSwahili, English (emotional expressions) and Geography (environment studies), Math (fractions, angles and shapes), Civics (Tanzanian tribes), and History (colonization and independence).

Once the posters and lesson booklet have been printed, we will follow up in workshops with teachers on the various ways they can use the material. They will also serve as models for teachers to make their own posters (training in poster design has become an important element in the project). Our distribution partner is Aidan Publishers, LTD., a publisher with extensive experience producing and distributing educational materials for the Tanzania market. They will edit the teaching materials and oversee the production and distribution of the posters and training booklet.

Time Frame
2007–present

Funding
Initiated by Sister Cities Durham/Arusha Tanzania, Funding from Trent Foundation, Center for Documentary Studies and Center for International Studies At Duke University and Duke Engage and the Rauschenberg Foundation.

Budget
Varies from year to year from $8,000 to about $50,000. Need to raise $200,000 for printing and distribution.

Reference Points
Tanzanian teachers and their needs.

Context
All primary students and teachers in Tanzania.

Continuity
We're continuing to train teachers across the country to use the posters and teach other teachers.

Reference Points

1 Poster announcing the fight in Detroit between Al Lewis, managed by my father and Eduardo Corletti, the great white hope ranked #2 in 1967. From the front row I watched Lewis win by a TKO in the 2nd round. I frequently accompanied my father to boxing events.

2 Catalogue of Wendy Snyder MacNeil exhibition of hanging platinum prints on rice paper, which were shot from a video screen with a 4×5. The catalogue was published by the Photographic Resource Center in Boston. The subjects are her husband and daughter. I always admired the intimacy and psychological/cultural exploration and technique of Wendy's portrait series.

3 *Aperture* Magazine 19:1, 1974 Portfolios by Wendy Snyder MacNeil, Emmet Gowin, Robert Frank, Gary Winogrand, Lee Friedlander, etc. This issue was edited by J. Green when I was at MIT, where Aperture was published then. Wendy Snyder MacNeil was my high school photography teacher and perhaps most important influence.

4 Emmet Gowin, *Photographs* 1976 I was making family portraits in college when I met Emmet and saw his work. Emmet started making pictures of his wife's family after marrying in 1964. He made pictures that resembled snapshots, shooting with a 4×5 camera as I did at the time. I was amazed by the sculptural and emotional qualities of these photographs.

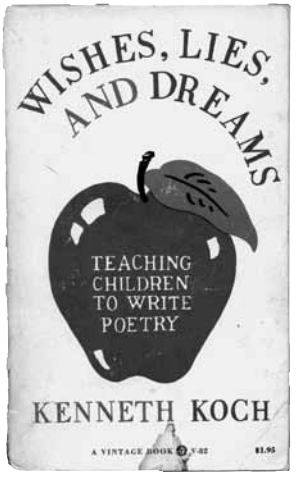
5 I looked to the Farm Security Administration (FSA) project as a way to understand the political power of photographs. Roy Stryker led the Information Division of the FSA during the Great Depression. This catalogue was published by the Library of Congress in 1968 and was a kind of blueprint for me for a while. It contains Roy Stryker's assignments to photographers as well as the photographs themselves.

6 Biographies of Artists included in *Modern Primitives* in Naïve Painting from the last 17th century until the present day by Oto Bihalji Meruin, 1971. It was important to me to know that these artists were ordinary people in their own communities, like Ferdinand Cheval who was a rural letter carrier, who picked up stones along his route to make the monumental sculpture, *Palais Idéal*.

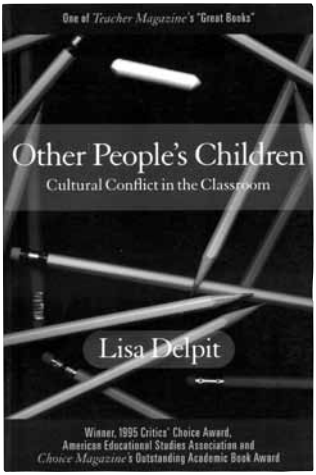
7 Jean Mohr *A Seventh Man; A Book of Images and Words About the Experience of Migrant Workers in Europe* was published in 1975. Photographer Jean Mohr worked with art critic, novelist, and documentary writer John Berger to make this hybrid book that describes the centrality of the migrant worker to modern experience. They used photographs, political analysis, poetry, fiction and economics to question "any preconceptions about its subject."

8 Huichole children painting a fresco. *Imaginacion y Realidad; Pintura Indigena Infantil* by Marianna Yanpolsky, 1980, is a gorgeous book of paintings by indigenous children in Mexico and photographs documenting the landscape around them. It highlights the relationship between the paintings, the landscape and culture.

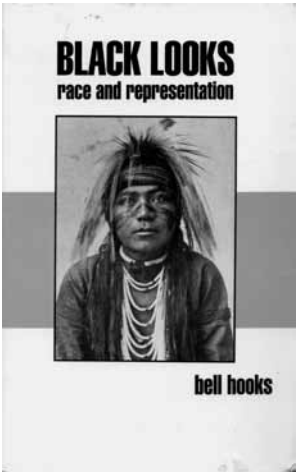
9 Painting by Cirilo Gonzalez Mercado, twelve years old, and Filiberto Carrillo de la Cruz, thirteen years old.



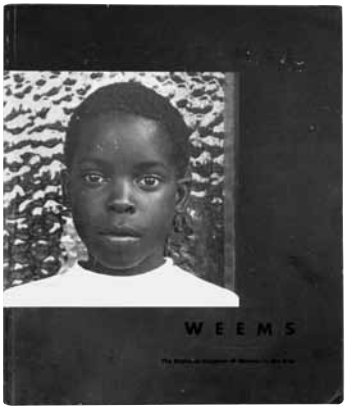
10 Kenneth Koch in *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams* describes his way of teaching children to write poetry as "free, deep and extravagant". I was excited that an artist like Koch could use his skills to work with kids.



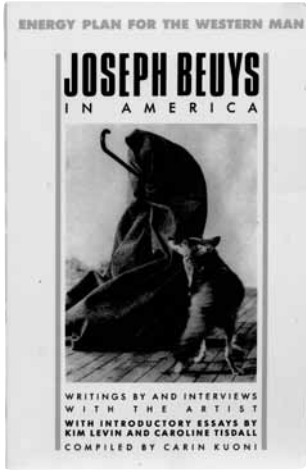
11 Lisa Delpit *Other People's Children*. The writing of Lisa Delpit, who was briefly in my dorm in college, made a lot of sense to me when I began looking for texts for my Duke University students to read. I was excited by the political and cultural issues that arose in public education. When I started working on *American Alphabets*, I read a book of essays about Ebonics that Lisa edited.



12 bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation.* I discovered this book when I was working on the project *Black Self/White Self*. It confirmed some of the things I'd thought about, and gave me the courage to keep working on a difficult subject. "It is only as we collectively change the way we look at ourselves and the world that we can change how we are seen."



13 Carrie Mae Weems, *The National Museum Of Women In The Arts,* 1993. Artist Carrie Mae Weems showed me how it was possible to create photographs and installations that deal with some of the political and ethnic issue I was thinking about.



14 Joseph Beuys' book *In America; Energy Plan for the Western Man*, edited by Carin Kuoni, 1990. I came to Beuys later through my experiments in education and photography, but his notion of social sculpture, that everyone is a an artist, resonates with my experience. I believe that it is possible, as Beuys said in 1973, that "art is now the only evolutionary-revolutionary power."

Wendy Ewald is a conceptual artist and educator who has collaborated for forty years in art projects with children, families, women, and teachers worldwide. Starting as documentary investigations of places and communities, Ewald's projects probe questions of identity and cultural differences. In her work with children, she encourages them to use cameras to record themselves, their families, and their communities, and to articulate their fantasies and dreams. Ewald herself often makes photographs within the communities she works with and has the children mark or write on her negatives, thereby challenging the concept of who actually makes an image, who is the photographer and who the subject, who the observer and who the observed. In blurring the distinction of individual authorship and throwing into doubt the artist's intentions, power, and identity, Ewald creates opportunities to look at the meaning and use of photographic images in our lives with fresh perceptions. Ewald has received many honors, including a MacArthur Fellowship. Her work was included in the 1997 Whitney Biennial. She has published ten books; her fifth was a retrospective documenting her projects entitled *Secret Games*.

Nolan Calisch is an artist, photographer, and organic farmer with an interdisciplinary practice. Calisch's work expands the traditional documentary approach through collaboration and participation. He is part of several ongoing artistic collaborations including Farm School and Public Doors & Windows. He holds a BA in Cinema from Denison University and an MFA in Art and Social Practice from Portland State University. His work has been shown at the Houston Center for Photography, New Space Gallery, San Francisco Museum of Craft and Folk Art, Portland Art Museum, and the Matisse Museum in Le Cateau-Cambrésis, among others. He lives on his organic farm near Portland, Oregon where he grows food for 30 families through a CSA (community supported agriculture) program.

PSU Art and Social Practice
Reference Points Book Series

Edited by Nolan Calisch

Developmental consultation by
Jen Delos Reyes

Design by Molly Sherman

Copyedited by Kathryn Osterndorff

Published and printed by
Publication Studio
in Portland, Oregon

The Reference Points book series
is generously sponsored by
the Platt Family and Dave and
Erika Cianciulli.

ISBN 978-1-62462-065-2

psusocialpractice.org
publicationstudio.biz

This book is part of the Reference Points series published through Portland State University Art and Social Practice MFA Program. The series is an evolving pedagogical framework in which graduate students formulate and research a significant topic or practitioner(s) related to socially engaged art. Because the series is designed to shift and respond to the concerns of the program's current students and faculty, mode, structure, and content are open-ended.